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ABSTRACT

To gather information about local Alaskan schooling, researchers surveyed 327 rural school site administrators to determine their backgrounds, school activities, expectations of student performance, perceptions of school-community relations, and perceptions of the roles of actors in school governance. Results of the questionnaire indicated that rural principals in Alaska are likely to be middle-aged Caucasian males with at least 5 years of teaching experience and 3 years experience as a principal. Overall, rural principals spend significant amounts of time on classroom instruction and also on general administration, building maintenance, and support staff supervision. For principals in larger rural schools, administration, supervision, and maintenance are the main activities. Although principals' opinions of their students' abilities and of the conditions for learning and achievement in their schools are high, half are dissatisfied with student performance and most feel that their students will not progress beyond high school. The involvement of principals in community activities is extensive and usually related to education. Principals also participate in all areas of school governance and are the most influential in six of the eight areas surveyed; further, they perceive themselves as being the most important figure in overall school governance. (SB)

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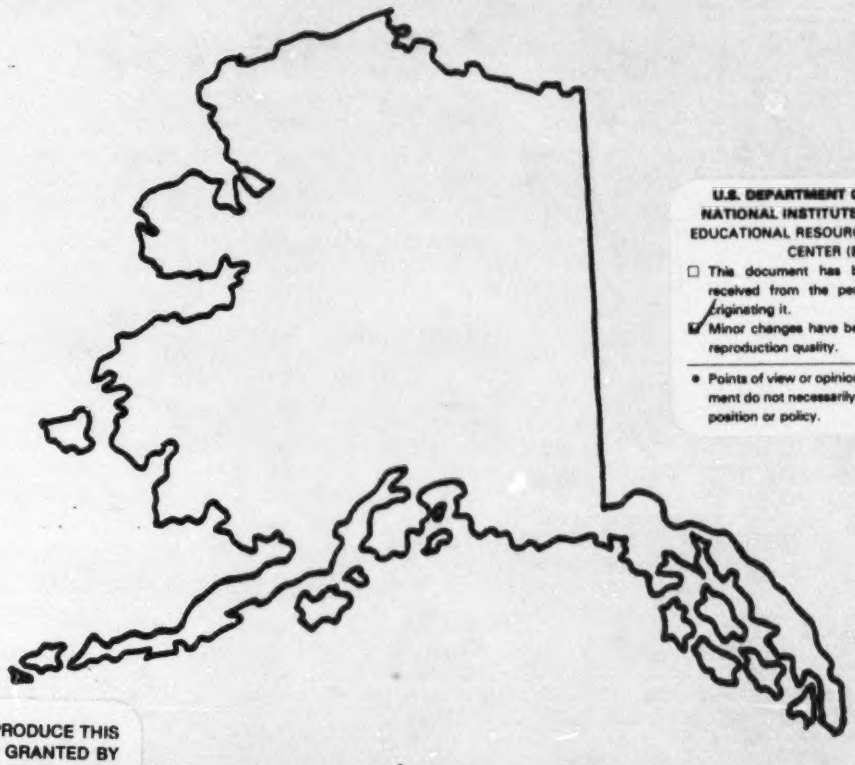
PRINCIPALS IN RURAL ALASKA: A DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE



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Principals in Rural Alaska: A Descriptive Profile

In spring 1981, we asked principals in rural Alaska to describe local school operations from their perspective. The purpose was to collect information about local schooling, as part of a three-year study of "Decentralized Education in Rural Alaska," funded by the National Institute of Education. Principals were the first respondents, because they were most likely to possess information on a wide range of topics and issues. Also, the perceptions of principals about the context in which schooling occurs seemed to be an important key to the environment of rural education.

Some 96 percent of those we wrote answered our questions, and many did so in considerable detail. In this report, we present aspects of the background of rural principals, their school activities, expectations of student performance, perceptions of school-community relations and roles of actors in school governance. Finally, we draw some very tentative generalizations on principals as brokers of local education in rural Alaska.

A Profile of Rural School Principals

Alaska rural school principals are likely to be middle-aged, Caucasian males who have taught school at least five years and served as principals for approximately three years.

The average age of principals is 41 years, with the youngest principal 26 and the oldest 63. Some 82 percent of rural principals are male. Only 4 percent (13) of the principals are non-Caucasian, and in this respect principals are unlike rural Alaskans, the majority of whom are Indian, Eskimos, or Aleuts.

Most principals, however, have considerable experience in rural Alaska. The average years' residence is 4.5, with a range from less than one year (2 percent) to more than 16 years (11 percent). Many new and old principals have lived in other rural cultures and gained experience through the Peace Corps, study abroad, or teaching in rural areas of the U.S. or foreign countries. Thus, rural principals are not new actors on the rural scene.

Most principals taught school for an average of five years, and from this basis were selected to be principals or principal-teachers of local schools. While the average length of service for principals is 2 years, this statistic camouflages a wide range of variation. Some 36 percent of the principals had not been chief school administrators the previous year (see Table 1). No more than 16 percent of the principals had held positions over a five-year period in the same school. These facts highlight the high rate of turnover in the rural principalship (which is greater than the rate of turnover of rural teachers).

TABLE 1.--School Size and Principal Turnover

Turnover	School Size: Small (1-50 students)	Medium (51-150 students)	Large (151-400 students)	Row Total
One year/less as principal	20.8%	10.0%	5.5%	36.3%
over one year	29.4%	18.3%	15.9%	63.6%
Total	50.2%	28.3%	21.4%	100.0%

n=289

There is far greater variation in the environment of rural education than is the case in Alaska's city schools, and this variation is reflected in the administrative position of principal. Nearly 45 percent of rural schools are directed by heads or principal-teachers. They work in very small schools with fewer than 50 students, where they are the only teacher or share teaching responsibilities with no more than five other teachers. This position is much different from the principalship in the larger rural schools such as those in Bethel, Kotzebue, Barrow, Dillingham, and Nome. Here, principals tend to have no classroom responsibilities. But the schools are still small by urban American standards, and the position of principal in them more resembles that of team leader than it does the executive director of a complex institution. The principalship in the larger rural schools tends to resemble that in other rural regions of the United States.

Because of the difference between the roles of principal-teachers and principals, and the high rate of turnover in rural schools, we have qualified many of our general observations based on these factors.

School Activities of Rural School Principals

The time school staff spend on actitivites is related to school outcomes, and thus we asked what amount of time during the average school day principals used in these areas: classroom instruction, long-range curricular planning, supervision of teaching and classified staff, extra-curricular activities, discipline, administration, and maintenance. Generally, observational data are needed to establish the activities in which school professionals are engaged. However, field site visits as part of the project provided opportunities to observe principals in action, and they tended to confirm the reports of respondents to this question.

Classroom Instruction. We mentioned that most of the small school principals had classroom responsibilities as teachers. What surprised us was that nearly 30 percent of the large school principals spent a substantial amount of time (defined as 30 percent or more of their hours during the average school week) in classroom instruction. Thus, two-thirds of rural principals play important instructional roles in their schools, which is a striking contrast to the activity of urban school principals in Alaska and principals outside the state.

Supervision of Staff. Thirty-nine percent of all principals reported spending a substantial amount of their time supervising classified staff (secretarial and custodial personnel) and teachers' aides. In the smallest schools, support staff supervision is a relatively simple activity, but may absorb a great deal of time. (For 13.5 percent of these principals, it took almost half of their time.) In larger rural schools, especially those with assistant principals, somewhat more time was allocated to this function.

Fewer principals spent time supervising the teaching staff--approximately one in four reported devoting a substantial amount of their hours to this activity. Again, there were differences between principal-teachers and larger school principals on this dimension, with more of the latter allocating time to it.

Building Maintenance. Maintenance problems figure large in the folklore of rural Alaska education, for the environmental setting of rural areas, especially the extremes in weather, test severely the operation of mechanical equipment. We had expected to find that most principals would spend a substantial amount of their time on maintenance-related matters, but found that only a third did so, and there was no significant difference between small and large school principals. Several principals reported that with new building construction and other improvements in the financial picture of rural education (which resulted in increased support from the district office), it was possible to maintain facilities with less direct involvement of principals.

Student Relations. Most rural principals come into contact with students in the classroom, as teachers, and this context shapes their further involvement with students. Fewer than 10 percent reported they spent a substantial amount of time planning special activity with students outside of class, in sports or club functions, for example. And less then one-quarter reported devoting a substantial amount of time to disciplining students. (Larger school principals were more likely to be involved than principal-teachers.) In the family-like setting of most rural schools, a formal system of discipline, with the principal as the arbitrator and dispenser of punishments, is relatively rare.

General Administration. Most principals reported on and complained of the paper flow through their offices. Even in one- and two-teacher schools, there is a good deal of routine administrative work--to meet requirements and requests from the district office, the state Department of Education, and the federal government. However, less than one-half reported that they spent a

substantial amount of their time in this area. (As expected, principals of larger schools devoted more time to administrative duties.) Another topic on which we questioned principals was long-term planning, including that related to curriculum development. Our question was imprecise and many principals included in this category the ongoing discussions that are part of collegial relations. Some 35 percent reported allocating substantial time to this broad area.

These activity areas are represented graphically below. Table 2 shows this overall distribution of time for principal-teachers: classroom instruction tops the list, followed by general administrative duties, maintenance concerns, and supervision of support staff (including teachers' aides). Receiving a substantial amount of attention from fewer principal-teachers are: supervision of certified staff, discipline, and planning extra-curricular activities.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPAL-TEACHERS REPORTING

ZERO, SOME OR MUCH TIME IN VARIOUS ACTIVITY AREAS:

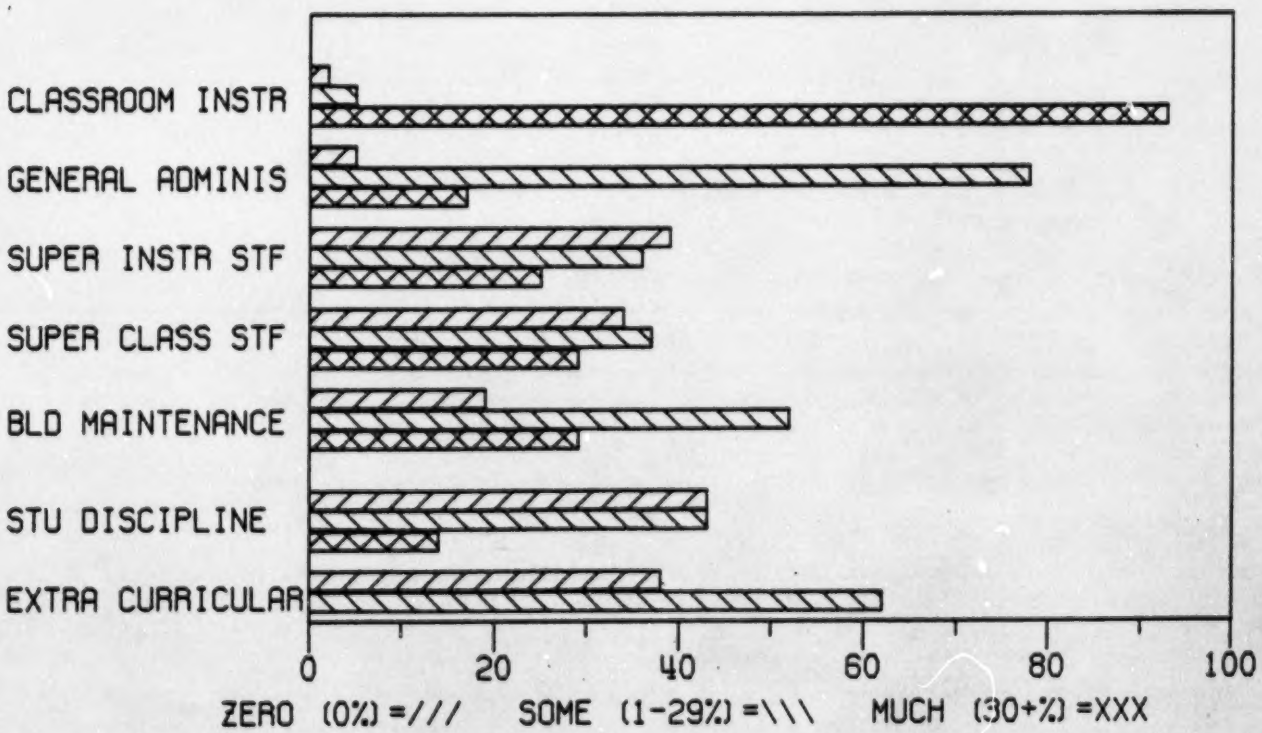
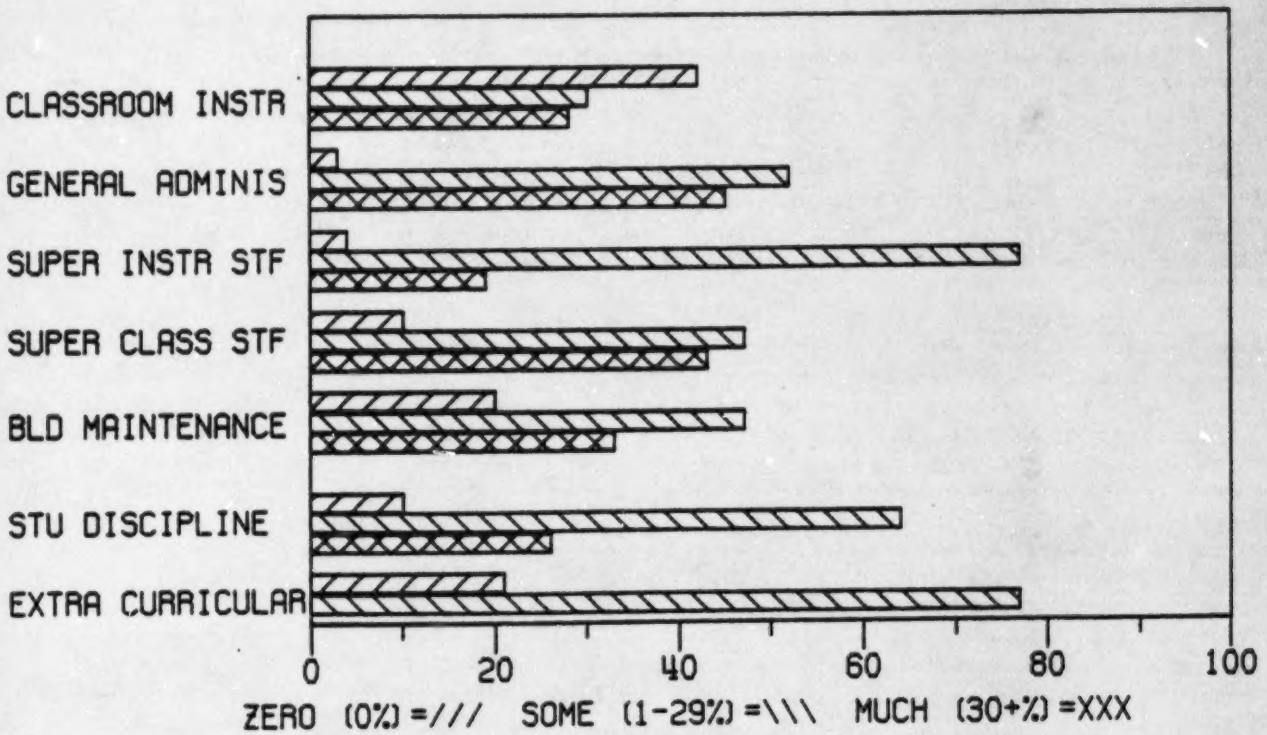


Table 3 shows that the distribution of time of principals in larger rural schools is different: administrative work, supervision of classified staff, and maintenance concerns take more time than classroom instruction and discipline. Supervision of instructional staff and planning for extra-curricular activities are least important.

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS REPORTING ZERO, SOME OR MUCH TIME IN VARIOUS ACTIVITY AREAS:



The Climate of Expectations

In the attempt to explain and improve school outcomes such as student reading and computational skills, scholars have focused on the school as a social system and the role of teachers and principals in developing a "climate" in which learning is fostered. We asked principals what their perceptions of the climate of expectations were and requested that they comment on the expectations of parents too.

Completion of High School. A majority of the principals felt that almost all of the students in their schools would graduate from high school. Furthermore, principals felt that students' parents had the same expectations about high school graduation that they did.

Matriculation at College. Far fewer principals thought that students in their schools would enter a two-year or four-year post-secondary institution: 30 percent expected that most students would take a technical course of study at some point in the future, and 24 percent thought most students would go on to college. Principals were quick to point out the issues concerning college education for rural Alaskans--questions as to its appropriateness in providing training needed for employment in small communities, and questions concerning its likely effects in pulling rural students away from lives in their communities upon graduation.

These questions perhaps influenced principals' responses to items on expectations for college graduation. Half of those who thought students would matriculate at two-year institutions expected them to graduate, and only one-quarter of those who expected students to matriculate at four-year colleges thought they would be likely to graduate. There were no significant differences between principal-teachers and principals on this issue. But new principals were somewhat more pessimistic then those who had been in their post longer than a year.

Achievement and Ability. In general, principals were happy with the opportunities for growth that students in their school displayed. In fact, two-thirds thought ability in their schools was at the same level or higher than in other schools of the United States. At the extreme, 12 percent of the principals thought ability in their schools was much lower, a feeling expressed primarily by principal-teachers. And new principals were somewhat less enthusiastic than experienced principals about students' ability.

Principals were dissatisfied with the performance of students: approximately half felt students were not achieving as well as they could, an assessment made somewhat more by large school than by small school principals and by new as compared to old principals. Principals did not feel that their negative assessment of student achievement was shared by parents: some 90 percent thought parents were completely satisfied with students' performance. This suggests some conflict between teachers' and parents' views of the academic curriculum. Finally, nearly two-thirds of the principals thought conditions for achievement and learning in their schools were equal to or better than those of other U.S. schools.

Principals, then, appear to have mixed expectations about students. They are most unlike urban school principals (in Alaska and in the contiguous-48 states) with respect to post-secondary work and its role in the future lives of rural youths. Principals are not alone in their attitudes and beliefs in this regard.

School-Community Relations

Rural principals occupy a unique vantage point from which to observe relations between the school and community, and for this reason we asked them several questions on parent involvement in school activities. More than half of the principals reported that homework was regularly assigned in their schools, which is one way in which parents may be connected to school processes. And approximately three-fourths saw parents in their communities as wanting feedback from teachers and the principal on how well their children were doing in school.

More than eight out of ten principals said they knew their students' parents, and had contact with them two or more times a semester. (Those who did not know most parents in the community were, obviously, the newcomers.) In small communities with fewer than 50 students, we would expect this to be the case, but this observation was made by most principals in larger rural schools too. However, there was no sense from the responses that teacher-parent conferences were a particularly effective means of communicating information on students' progress in school.

Fewer than half of the principals reported that parents were strongly involved in school activities. A majority felt that parents were disinclined to take part in the operation of the school or its processes, a point reiterated in principals' comments on school governance.

Principals were not uniform in their own community involvement. Less than half reported that they had been involved in civic affairs unrelated to the school. The uninvolved principals were primarily new to their position and living in small villages where there are few opportunities for civic activity outside the school.

Rural schools in Alaska provide a number of services for parents and community members, and often they are the only community institution which sponsors such activities as the following:

TABLE 4.--Community Services of Rural Schools

Service/Activity	Percentage of communities in which provided
Library	86%
Showers and bathing facilities	55%
School newspaper, radio, or TV program	49%
Classrooms for community education	40%
Movies	49%
Cafeteria or restaurant	52%
Gymnasium or swimming pool	58%
Engine or appliance repair shop	43%
Aid in preparing income tax/other forms	19%
First aid or emergency services	27%

Principals see their schools as connected to the community through these means, and through extensive teacher-student and teacher-parent ties. However, preliminary analysis of our field data indicates that the opinion of principals divides on the bonding of school and community outside of explicit educational functions. In some communities, there is the perception that the school is an integral part of community life; in others, the principals see the school as distinct from the community.

Principals in School Governance

Schools in rural Alaska are like other local organizations in the state (for example, city governments, ANCSA corporations, nonprofit associations) in that they are relatively open systems. In this respect, they are different from urban schools which are commonly pictured as insulated from social pressures. Schools in rural Alaska are potentially open to the influence of students, parents, and other members of the communities in which they are situated. Within the school administrative nexus, they are steered by principals and teachers at the building site, by local school committees, and by members of the district office staff (particularly the superintendent), and the district school board. Schools are also potentially exposed to governments (local, state, and national) and to special interest groups, such as teachers' unions, ethnic associations, and business organizations.

We questioned rural principals about the participation in school governance of seven individual or group actors: principals themselves, teachers, students, parents and other community adults, local advisory board, the district superintendent, and the district school board. Instead of asking for comments on participation and influence in general terms, we described a range of school functions, and asked respondents to tell us who participated in each. As expected, principals perceived that most of the actors took part in the various areas of school activity and that with few exceptions principals themselves were the most consistent participants.

To principals it appears that teachers, parents/community members, and students are "issue activists" in the school system. Most principals thought students were active only in proposing new courses and defining acceptable student behavior. They also thought community members were regular participants in these two areas. But in addition, many principals saw parents as actively involved in the development of the school calendar and in school construction/-maintenance issues. (Principals clearly considered the local board to be representative of parents, and in their view this board appears to be a regular participant.)

The participation of teachers, from the vantage point of the principalship, was specialized in different areas--all curricular areas, the school calendar, and student behavior.

Regular participants in school governance were principals, local and regional boards, and superintendents. Principals saw these four actors as more strongly involved than teachers, students, and parents in the areas of staff hiring, planning the school budget, defining community use of facilities, and school construction matters.

There were differences in the evaluations of small and large school principals. For example, principals in large rural schools were less likely to see local school committees as active agents in decisionmaking, for the obvious reason that fewer of the large rural schools have such committees. They were also likely to regard all other agents, and particularly the superintendent and district school board, as regular participants than were principal-teachers. To some extent, this is a result of the fact that the larger schools are more likely to be city school districts, where the superintendent and district board are highly visible agents (as opposed to small schools, which are more likely to be part of the REAA system, in which superintendents and regional boards are often distant forces). But this does not explain the perception of greater participation by teachers, parents, and even students in large schools. Here the data suggest that there is sufficient "crowding" in large rural schools that the participation of informed actors is visible.

There were also a few differences in perceptions of new principals as compared to experienced ones. For example, new principals tended to see teachers and parents as less involved in areas such as text selection and new course proposal. Local education committees on the other hand were more involved in areas such as defining student behavior and construction needs. One possible explanation of these differences (which are slight) is that principals new to the system are more taken by formal than by informal actors.

Little information on the influence of principals is derived from an examination of the participation of all school actors, and for this reason we asked respondents to comment on which actor they thought was most influential in eight areas of school operations. Table 5 summarizes responses to these questions.

Principals in rural Alaska appear to see other actors of paramount influence in only two areas. They acknowledge that the superintendent is the chief hiring officer (for principals and teachers), and they think the local advisory board (the district school board and superintendent, in larger schools) has more influence over the school calendar and daily school schedule. In the remaining six areas, principals see themselves as superior, but there are rivals or competitors. What is perhaps most interesting is that the local and regional boards and the superintendent--whom we categorized with the principals as regular local school actors--are not regarded as possessing aggregate influence across the range of functions.

TABLE 5.--Influence of Selected Actors on School Operations

		Percentage of Rural Principals Regarding...as Most Influential*				
		Principal	Teachers	Local Board	Sup't	Dist. Board
1.	Hiring principals, teachers**	10	--	11	68	8
2.	Hiring other school personnel	56	1	18	21	3
3.	Deciding how school budget will be spent	46	3	6	35	10
4.	Approving textbooks for the school	43	27	5	11	11
5.	Deciding on school calendar	21	5	28	16	13
6.	Deciding on new courses/programs	41	19	10	15	12
7.	Deciding on acceptable student behavior	56	18	13	3	6
8.	Deciding on community use of facilities	42	1	26	13	12

*Students, parents/community, and district staff are excluded from the table, for in no case did 5 percent or more of the principals regard them as having most influence. For this reason, row totals do not equal 100 percent.

**Our mistake was to group principals and teachers. Data collected in field research lead us to suspect that in the opinion of principals, they are also the most influential participants in the recruitment and retention of teachers.

We next asked principals to indicate which actor was "most important in overall school governance." Given the responses noted above, it comes as no surprise that some 53 percent of the respondents found principals to be most significant, followed by district superintendents (17 percent), district school boards (13 percent) and local boards (11 percent). Others have given similar responses. For example, 49 percent of a random sample of rural school teachers thought that principals were most significant, followed by superintendents (19 percent), and district boards (11 percent). None of the other groups we have surveyed has disputed the substantial participation of principals in all areas of school government and their influence, in determining schools outcomes.

Principals as Brokers of Local Rural Education

Given the great diversity of local school operations in rural Alaska, it is very difficult indeed to draw generalizations which apply to all schools. We can comment, though, on certain patterns in the data, which appear to apply to a large number of cases. One pattern we have mentioned--the tendency of principals to view themselves as the nominal center of an influence network in which other actors are linked to the principal on a one-to-one basis because of their expertise or interests. There is widespread agreement with this view of influence in the local school system--whether that system is rural or urban, Alaskan or national. This viewpoint fits into the broader scheme of analyses of American society called "pluralist," which assign some power and influence to a large number of groups, dependent on specific situations in which the expertise, resources, and interests of the groups are engaged. Rural school principals in this view are either leaders or brokers of interests and expertise, and the chief questions are the amount of pressure focused on the local school system, the amount of "capital" the principal has, and his skill in using it. What drives the principal is largely a matter of conjecture, but administrative and professional goals seem likely to play a large part in motivating action.

A second pattern is implied in many of the data we have collected, and this is a more traditional picture of the principal's role and influence. Following this approach, the principal is a broker of power and values who looks in two directions simultaneously--toward the local community (and its local school board or groups of active parents) and toward the district (and its board and superintendent). The principal sits at the center of intersecting spheres of action, and his relations with others usually involve more than one individual or group at the same time. These patterns are suggestive, but they do not reflect our complete or final interpretations of the responses principals kindly gave us, or the other information we have collected.

Conclusion

In summary, we find that rural principals are quite different from other individuals in their community environment, notwithstanding some experience in rural areas; and they are different from principals elsewhere. They spend their time in classroom instruction to a higher degree than is the case of urban principals (and principal-teachers, by definition, are primarily involved in teaching), but they are also involved in supervision of support staff, general administration, and maintenance problems. Principals' expectations of student performance are high, but these expectations do not include college as a realistic goal for rural youth. The involvement of principals in communities is extensive, and for the most part is primarily related to education.

Finally, we have introduced information on the influence of principals: they participate in all areas of school governance, are most influential in six of eight areas, and appear to be most important in overall school governance. In other research we have noted some ambiguity over the direction of influence of principals (particularly as it concerns relations with local boards and school committees). We suggested two ways of viewing the principalship that might explain some of the ambiguity and incongruence across information sources, which we will expand upon in future research and reports. We also save for future reports the question of significance--whether, for example, strong involvement by the principal in the community, or the community's strong participation in the local school system, have any measurable effects on what students learn and how they and their parents feel about the schooling experience.

A Methodological Note

We used the 1981 education directory to form a list of rural school principals. Our initial definition of rural comprehended all schools outside of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, and our unit of analysis was the building site administrator. In places with more than two schools, we inquired whether there was a consolidated local administration; and if there was, we included only that administrator. Some 327 school site administrators comprised the universe for the study.

We developed a questionnaire on local school operations, and pretested this in several sites with over 30 principals, teachers, superintendents, and education researchers. We mailed the survey to principals in late February, 1981 and followed this with two waves of mail surveys and telephone calls to non-respondents. Most of the data were collected by late May 1981, but a few surveys came in later.

Data were coded (most questions were closed-format type) by research assistants, and two verification routines were used to insure inter-coder reliability. Coding sheets were directly encoded onto tape, which has been analyzed using the SPSS package.

A Note of Thanks

Our work would not have been possible without the excellent assistance and cooperation given us by Alaska's rural school principals and principal-teachers. They kindly took their time to complete the surveys and in many cases wrote extensive comments, which have helped our work immeasurably. We also thank the principals, teachers, and superintendents who helped us develop the questionnaire and pretest it.

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The views expressed in the report (along with any unintended errors and omissions) are those of the authors alone.